

## Michelle Steel: Politicians don't share our priorities

By MICHELLE STEEL/ Contributing Writer

A government's budget is a reflection of the community's priorities. But the state budget recently passed by the Legislature does not reflect the priorities of the hardworking Californians who grow our food, teach our children, protect our streets or build the businesses that provide the jobs and tools we use to live our lives. Instead, it reflects the priorities of out-of-touch politicians anxious to spend our hard earned income on pet projects.

While the statements about fiscal restraint made by legislators and Gov. Jerry Brown during the budget process hit all the right notes, their actions don't match their rhetoric. This year's budget is the highest-spending budget in state history and it reminds me of budgets passed in the early 2000s that squandered high revenues and led to massive deficits in tougher economic times.

One of the worst parts of the budget is the Legislature's and governor's insistence on continuing the state's \$68 billion high-speed rail boondoggle, which is simply a waste of taxpayer dollars. It's not even clear whether the train will ever be finished because of a lack of funding, and serious mismanagement of the rail authority.

The high-speed rail continues to be tied up by costly litigation and plans to move forward with the project continue to break the rules set by voters when they passed Proposition 1A in 2008. Under current plans, the rail won't even be high speed!

Even if the train is ever finished, the state will be saddled with billions of dollars in debt, and year-after-year, will need to subsidize high operating costs due to low ridership. For students worried about school tuition, parents worried about making ends meet, farmers worried about watering their fields, and seniors planning for retirement, there are higher priorities than a high-cost, low-speed train.

If only the waste stopped there. With California in a severe drought, and residents already doing a good job conserving water, policymakers in Sacramento have left our state's water system behind. Dire warnings of parched fields in the fertile Central Valley bring only small emergency measures when what are needed are big long-term solutions. A real priority to help all Californians would be new water reservoirs to store the water we'll need during future dry spells.

Another top priority should be paying down state liabilities estimated by the independent Legislative Analyst's Office to be \$340 billion – that's about three times larger than the record-setting budget lawmakers just passed. While the governor and legislators took some additional steps toward funding teacher pensions, further actions are essential to protect the retirement plans of teachers and law enforcement and relieve the weight of debt from future generations of Californians.

Additionally, the state needs to start funding its own corrections system instead of requiring local governments to do their work.

The prison realignment implemented by the governor and legislators hurts city and county governments and local communities by burdening them with hardened state prisoners that local jails don't have the capacity to absorb.

For too long, politicians in Sacramento have used court orders as an excuse to pass the buck to local governments. It's the state government's responsibility to ensure California has a viable corrections system. Period.

For all the happy talk from Sacramento, this latest budget is yet another example of a failure to govern by politicians, who have prioritized their own pet causes rather than making California a better state in which to live.

Michelle Steel is a candidate for Orange County supervisor, 2nd District.